Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union (review)

Jeffrey Brooks

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 74, Number 2, Summer 2000, pp. 391-392 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2000.0057*

Martin Miller. *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. xvii + 237 pp. $30.00.

Freud's impact on Russia was predictable: the country's intellectual elite followed European trends, and artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich were at home in Western capitals, as were some Russian physicians and scientists. Martin Miller situates Russian Freudianism in the history of medicine, however, not in cultural ferment, and there is merit to his approach. Freud had an enormous impact on Russian medicine, first as an exciting outside influence and then as a powerful taboo, and Miller tells this story with spirit. He shows that late-imperial Russian medicine, in contrast to music, literature, and the arts, was largely on the receiving end of the cultural interchange. However, his discussion of female Russian psychiatrists—such as Tatiana Rosenthal, who studied in Zurich, and Sabina Spielrein, who he suggests may have anticipated Freud's notion of the "death instinct" (p. 45)—raises the possibility that women may have figured differently in Russian Freudianism. He concludes that by World War I, psychiatry was sufficiently established in Russia so that patients seeking treatment no longer had to travel abroad.

Miller comments perceptively on early Soviet Freudians, who floundered, as he puts it, in an attempt "at pleasing two fathers" (p. 60): after 1917, they contrarily sought approval both from the International Psychoanalytic Association and from the Bolsheviks. Despite the sympathy of Lunacharsky, Bukharin, and Trotsky, early Soviet Freudians faced an impossible task. Soviet cultural life was inherently inimical to Freudianism except at the outset of the New Economic Policy (1921–27), when a mixed economy and some flexibility in cultural policy facilitated a brief modus vivendi. Even while Russian Freudians pursued their initiatives, the idea of an analysis of individual problems did not accord with the country's massive social ills. Nevertheless, from 1921 through 1923 a small school for disturbed children was run according to Freudian principles, Freud's works were translated and published, and the Russian Psychoanalytic Institute won recognition at home and abroad.

Russian Freudianism petered out in the mid-1920s amid implausible efforts to reconcile Freud with Marx. Even had common ground existed, the evolution of the Soviet official ideology precluded such an accord. Despite the hostile climate, Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky, who were involved in the project, were destined to make important contributions in psychology. Miller also writes interestingly about Lenin's and Trotsky's views of Freud.

One blank space in Miller's story is World War II. This was a time of relaxed control of intellectual life, and of massive trauma when some intellectuals turned to Freud for inspiration. It is a shame that he passes over this period in a mere page or two, and picks up the story only after Stalin's death when there was a surge of interest. Somewhat later, the Brezhnev government itself prepared the way for a revival of Freudianism by nurturing a cadre of specialists who studied

Freud and the Freudians in order to denounce them. As Miller demonstrates, during this period Soviet specialists acquired a considerable understanding not only of Freud's writings but also of Western thinkers influenced by Freud, including Eric Fromm and Jacques Lacan.

In the final chapter, "Psychoanalysis and Soviet History," the author moves beyond medicine to consider the uses made of Freudian concepts in the reinterpretation of Russia's past under Gorbachev and subsequently. In concluding, he attributes the Soviet rejection of Freudianism to a lasting conflict between collectivism and individualism: "The competing visions were not reconcilable, despite the great efforts by Soviet Freudians in the 1920s to find an accommodation" (p. 167). In retrospect, it is hard to envisage a more unlikely combination than Freudianism and "Soviet power," as the Bolsheviks misleadingly referred to their system.

Jeffrey Brooks
Johns Hopkins University